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OXFORD STUDIES IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURES

POSTCOLONIAL LIFE NARRATIVES

Testimonial Transactions

Gillian Whitlock



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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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First Edition published in 2015

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014955276

ISBN 978-0-19-956063-9 (hbk.)
ISBN 978-0-19-956062-2 (pbk.)

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

Cover image: © Photodisc

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was supported by a Discovery grant from the Australian Research Council, additional support from the University of Queensland, a fellowship from the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University, and a visiting fellowship at the Life Narrative Centre of King's College London.

The enthusiasm and support of Elleke Boehmer, the general editor of this series and a key reader, has been vital throughout this project. This book was inspired by Stephanie Newell's first volume in the series, on West African literatures, and encouraged by Graham Huggan's earlier volume in the series as well as his reading of drafts of this one. The scholarship and friendship of Leigh Gilmore, Rosanne Kennedy, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson have shaped this book throughout. My colleagues at the University of Queensland encouraged this project in many ways, and particular thanks to Francis Bonner and Jason Jacobs, who inaugurated a course on adaptation that focused my thinking on how texts move. The AustLit team at the University of Queensland were instrumental in mapping indigenous literature in transit. Others whose work and encouragement are imprinted throughout include Anne Brewster, Diana Brydon, Kylie Cardell, David Carter, Deirdre Coleman, Vilashini Cooppan, Robert Dixon, Dorothy Driver, Kate Douglas, Margery Fee, Mark Finnane, Debjani Ganguly, Leili Golafshani, Anna Haebich, Joan Holloway, Craig Howes, Anna Poletti, Margaretta Jolly, Rosemary Jolly, Sue Kossew, Ashok Mathur, Sarah Nuttall, Roger Osborne, Hano Pipic, Julie Rak, Kay Schaffer, and Sue Thomas. Special thanks to Bart Moore-Gilbert for encouraging conversations on connecting 'postcolonialism' to 'autobiography', and to Carmen Keates and Chris Tiffin for research assistance.

More expansively these chapters have been informed by discussions and feedback from a number of conferences and seminars

where I have presented my thinking on postcolonial life narrative. These include the International Biography and Autobiography Association conferences in Hawaii, Sussex and Canberra, the Autobiography in the Americas conference at Puerto Rico, Scenes of Reading at the University of Sydney, the AULLA Worldmaking congress at the University of Queensland, Life Writing and Human Rights at Kingston University, London and Literature in a Global Age at the Humanities Research Centre of the ANU.

A version of chapter 3 was published in *Biography* and earlier thinking on the transits of *My Place* appeared in Robert Dixon and Brigid Rooney, eds., *Scenes of Reading*. My thanks for permission to reprint.

Thanks as always to Sam and Annika, and to Leo, Ari, Tia, and Teo. Above all to Gerry, who makes it possible for me to think and write about contiguous lives.

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Introduction

Fanon's struggle to hold on to the Enlightenment idea of the human—even when he knew that European imperialism had reduced that idea to the figure of the settler-colonial white man—is now itself part of the global heritage of all postcolonial thinkers.

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, 5)

This book draws together postcolonialism and life writing, to mark out a field of postcolonial life writing. It follows life narratives on the move, beginning in Part 1 with slave narratives, letters, memoirs, journals, and biographies and then moving in Part 2 to a series of case studies of contemporary testimonial narrative from Africa, Canada, Australia, the Caribbean, and India. The focus on testimonial *transactions* shapes the postcolonial history and cultural dynamics that are mobilized here: moving beyond nation and narration to track transnational and transcultural passages of life narrative, its volatile currency and value, and its changing technologies of the self. Frantz Fanon is one of postcolonialism's most controversial anti-imperial activists, and his thinking on human *being* here introduces a key theme of this book: the making of the human in and through testimonial transactions.¹

In his *Very Short Introduction to Postcolonialism* Robert J. C. Young argues that there is no single entity called 'postcolonial theory':

... much of postcolonial theory is not so much about static ideas or practices as about the relations between ideas and practices: relations of harmony, relations of conflict, generative relations between different peoples and their cultures. Postcolonialism is about a changing world, a world that has been changed by struggle and which its practitioners intend to change further. (2003, 7)

2 · Introduction

With this emphasis on struggle and social activism in mind, Young shapes his small book using the technique of montage: juxtaposing perspectives and times against one another, generating a creative set of relations between them. This approach to postcolonialism is reflected in the technique of reading that shapes this book, that draws life narratives into multiple and changing relations, ‘a series of shorts that stage the contradictions of the history of the present’ (Young, 8). Postcolonial literary criticism is a comparative and engaged reading practice that generates creative relations and associations through transactions of texts. Its classic moves—hybridizing, provincializing, writing back, contrapuntal reading, *métissage*—actively create intertextualities. In this book autobiographical narratives are drawn together: through contiguity, co-location, chronology, appropriation, and remediation to pursue an active engagement with textual transactions and social activism: the politics of abolitionism, anti-apartheid, indigeneity, feminism, environmentalism, refugee rights, for example. We must, as Homi Bhabha suggests, ‘go looking for the join’ (2010, 26): the ways that the work of testimony is enjoined in other discursive frames. In contemporary case studies, for example, the associations that are set in train by the passages of postcolonial life writing map textual cultures that extend far beyond their literary cultures of origin. Testimonial cycles mobilized by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Inquiry into the Stolen Generations in Australia create constellations of life writing that transfer and resonate transnationally, following the routes of ur texts. In these contemporary studies co-location and contiguity produce ways of thinking about the limits of testimonial cultures and social activism, for example on the subject of rape warfare, and representations of refugees and asylum seekers—those humans who become ‘things’. The contexts and locations that shape the ambit of these contemporary case studies are recognizably in the contact zone of postcolonial theory—the legacies of apartheid, slavery, indigenous dispossession, genocide, and decolonization across second and third worlds.

The association of postcolonialism and life writing is a recent development. Although ‘autobiography’ was widely used in literary criticism last century, it is now generally reserved for a literary

canon that privileges a specific Enlightenment archetype of selfhood: the rational, sovereign subject that is conceived as western, gendered male, and (as Chakrabarty's epigraph suggests) racially white. Traditional assumptions about autobiographical authorship and authority prioritize authenticity, autonomy, self-realization, and transcendence—western Enlightenment values that, as Linda Anderson observes, associate autobiography with essentialist or romantic notions of selfhood and the 'sovereign subject' of autobiography as it was traditionally understood: '[a]ccording to this view, generated at the end of the eighteenth century but still current in the middle of the twentieth, each individual possesses a unified, unique selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature' (2001, 5).² As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out, implicit in the canonization of a selective body of writing as 'autobiography' was an assumption that many other kinds of life writings produced at the same time are of lesser value—for example the slave narratives, women's journals and diaries, letters, memoirs, biographies, and travel narratives that populate Part 1 of this book, and that return as literary heritage in contemporary postcolonial literatures, recycled in new editions, appropriations, and remediations (2010, 3). For postcolonial theory, the more expansive category 'life writing' is critical for de/colonizing the subject, as these are the 'minor' genres that flourished in colonialism's literary cultures. The traditional sovereign subject of autobiography and the less exalted or collective subject of life narrative are entangled in western modernity. These are *proximate* subjects, and they complicate the origin myth of 'autobiography' in the European Enlightenment with a more hybrid genealogy.³ Although I will sometimes use 'autobiographical' as an adjective in this book, if it appears as a noun I am referring to a particular genre of life writing. In this, and in general, the usage of key terms and concepts here draws on a series of reference books that establish settings for the field of life writing, for example Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography*, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, Margaretta Jolly's *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, and Bart Moore-Gilbert's *Postcolonial Life-Writing*, which introduces and maps the field in a wide-ranging way.⁴ Key concepts in postcolonial theory and criticism draw on the *Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Graham Huggan.

Late last century critical interventions under the broad rubric of 'de/colonizing the subject' drew on feminism and postcolonialism to extend these conditions and limits of autobiography as a literary genre, an intervention that produced the field now called postcolonial 'life writing' or (with an interdisciplinary turn) 'life narrative'.⁵ Reading across Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial networks, Françoise Lionnet argues for the importance of postcolonial transculturation, *métissage*, and appropriation as critical concepts in this de/colonization of autobiographical literature. The lines of literary filiation and affiliation are as complex as the 'bloodlines of slave cultures', she argues (1995, 42), beginning to map postcolonial life narrative in terms of the experiences of the dispossessed and the passages of testimonial literature in colonial modernity in a way that suggests the settings for this book. It is, as Caren Kaplan argues, testimony above all that requires new strategies of reading cultural production as transnational (and intertextual) activity, for it thoroughly unsettles the terms and conditions of classical autobiography (1992, 122).

There is then both an historical and a conceptual logic that places Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, the first British slave narrative published in 1789, at the beginning of this book. It is not unusual for literary histories of autobiography to commence in the late eighteenth century and western modernity. However, beginning with Equiano continues this critical work of de/colonizing the subject of autobiography, and establishing a postcolonial history of life writing that recognizes the subjects of 'colonial modernity'—that space and time produced by the 'new world' encounters with Enlightenment modernity. As Bart Moore-Gilbert points out in a striking example of comparative reading, Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of Equiano's contemporaries and his *Confessions*, widely celebrated as the first modern autobiography, was published posthumously between 1782 and 1789. The historical proximity of Equiano and Rousseau, the *Interesting Narrative* and the *Confessions*, the beginnings of life narrative and autobiography, complicates a singular story of the origins (and pedigree) of autobiographical writing. Rousseau drew on Enlightenment notions of individualism to celebrate 'Myself alone . . . I am not made like any other I have seen . . .' (2008, 5). In the late eighteenth century this canonical autobiographical text of western modernity coexists alongside Equiano's slave narrative, a testimonial

that speaks on behalf of a collective rather than the singular authoritative 'I'. This also draws on Enlightenment humanism and its thinking on the 'rights of man' to make a claim for recognition and social justice as a human being, rather than a commodity and a thing. The coexistence of these very different autobiographical subjects and texts triggers reading which is inspired by what Bhabha calls the 'join'. Part 1 of this book, 'Colonial Testimonial', begins with a single year, 1789, when Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* was first published, the last volumes of Rousseau's *Confessions* appeared, and the first journals from the penal settlement at Botany Bay appealed to the metropolitan readership. The proximity of these very different life writings that begin this book introduces a methodology of postcolonial reading that engages with literary filiation, colonial modernity, and the 'bloodlines of slave cultures'. These diverse legacies of life writing in Enlightenment modernity begin the *longue durée* of postcolonial life narrative that shapes the infrastructure of this book.

The concept of history as a *durée* here suggests the complex temporality of past, present, and future in testimonial life writing, those 'affective clusterings where history makes its mark' (Cooppan 2013b, 104). It draws on Franco Moretti's characterization of life cycles of literary forms in terms of *durée*, cycles, and events.⁶ This *longue durée* of life writing begins in colonial modernity, and the transformation and transculturation of western modernity beyond Europe. For testimonial narrative in particular, Enlightenment thinking on the emotions—sympathy, pity, and compassion—and on the human—humanism, humanitarianism, and human rights—produced new possibilities for social activism. Testimonial 'cycles', on the other hand, are more temporary structures associated with specific campaigns and eras, finite flourishes 'that *last* in time, but always only for *some* time', that exhaust their potential, and dissipate as their form is 'no longer capable of representing the most significant forms of contemporary reality' (Moretti 2005, 17). A series of testimonial cultures are featured here, including slave narratives associated with abolition and emancipation campaigns, South African Truth and Reconciliation testimony and memoir, the emergent testimonial culture of Dalit activism, and Stolen Generations and Residential School indigenous testimony in Canada and Australia. The present 'tense' of testimony, as Bhabha suggests, can have a transformative force, but the agency of testimonial cultures is finite. A history of

postcolonial life writing is shaped by this ebb and flow of social activism and resistance. The final phase in Moretti's life cycles of literary forms is the 'event'—the most ephemeral and mercurial life narrative, a 'breathless rush' that is tenuous and opportunistic, where testimonies catalyse witness briefly. In this book the opportunism and tenuousness of the 'event' shapes essays on the faltering of testimonial narrative on behalf of the vulnerable subjects of rape warfare and insurgency in the DRC, and on representations of asylum seekers and refugees, where social suffering also remains unrecognized. David Farrier remarks on the scandalous absence of the asylum seeker and refugee in postcolonial studies; this is, he suggests, the new subaltern who initiates a step beyond postcolonial discourse, producing new lines of engagement with deterritorialized sovereignty (2011, 5).⁷ Here asylum seekers return the endings of this book back to its beginnings, as affiliations between slavery and the insidious violence of forced migration return to the 'bloodlines' of postcolonial life narrative in colonial modernity.

This approach to postcolonial life narrative and its textual transactions draws on a turn to textual cultures in postcolonialism (Huggan 2001, Brouillette 2007, Whitlock 2007, Fraser 2008) that insists on the materiality of the text as an object, a commodity, and an artifact, and it reads the 'whole beast' from snout to tail: cover to cover, peritext and paratext. It is interested in the changing thresholds that shape the ebb and flow of life narratives in specific markets or (increasingly) media, and the transfer of texts through adaptation, appropriation, and remediation. The global commodification of alterity creates opportunities for authors, publishers, readers, and critics. However Sara Ahmed's work on the cultural politics of the emotions raises questions about the emotional and ethical investments that are made in life narrative by metropolitan consumers. Rather than associating emotions with individual psychological states, Ahmed emphasizes the social and cultural work of the emotions as they attach to different subjects, ideas, and values; emotions 'produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects' (2004, 10). Recent work on the history of the emotions moves the emotions out of the private and individual sphere and into collective and plural public spheres, which Ahmed calls an 'economy of affect'. Testimonial transactions create intimate attachments through empathy and compassion, and

provoke shame and aversion; however, these are changing currencies in this economy of affect, which are registered in the ebb and flow of postcolonial life narratives.

Campaigns for social justice catalyse these passages of moving testimony. For example, Olaudah Equiano's tactical appeal to 'benevolence', 'suffering', and 'man' evokes an ethics of witnessing and sympathetic interestedness that became available for testimonial narrative in the late eighteenth century during the campaigns for abolition and emancipation. Equiano uses the historical and ideological shaping of this narrating 'I' to speak as a human being. Although there is now significant critical work on the role of the novel in the expansion of sympathy and the invention of human rights that begins in the western Enlightenment the role of autobiographical narrative and colonial modernity are also critical. The association of human rights and narrated lives is a legacy of Enlightenment thinking, and the 'bloodlines of slave cultures'. The ethics of recognition that shape the testimonial contract and position the reader as witness are legacies of western humanism that are rigorously contested by postcolonial critique, for example Frantz Fanon's identification of the free, autonomous, and rational subject of Enlightenment humanism with 'the settler white man'. Fanon makes this case in a powerful autobiographical account of his encounter with racism in mainland France, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). For postcolonialism, the human is a conflicted and limited concept and autobiographical representations have the power to represent the impact of this on specific bodies, lives, and peoples. As Chakrabarty suggests in the epigraph to this Introduction, Fanon's response to this was to struggle to hold on to the idea of the human, and to imagine a 'new brand of humanism' (Haddour 2006, viii) through postcolonial critique. The desire to imagine 'new' humanisms that attempt 'to reformulate it as a non-conflictual concept, no longer defined against a sub-human other', is a postcolonial heritage (Young 1995, 125). This struggle with humanism and its ethics of recognition drives canonical postcolonial projects—such as Edward Said's *Orientalism*, for example, and Gayatri Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', with its specific call for an ethical reading attentive to the encounter with the other in testimonial discourse. Achille Mbembe questions 'What is postcolonial thinking?' It is, he says, not a critique of the West per se

‘but of the effects of cruelty and blindness produced by a certain conception—I’d call it colonial—of reason, of humanism, and of universalism . . . it reveals how what passed for European humanism manifested itself in the colonies as duplicity, double-talk, and a travesty of reality’ (2008, 1–2). In this book a series of ‘articulate antagonists’—Benita Parry’s term for those who disrupt the discourses of subjectivity available to them (2004, 22)—defy the conditions and limits that are offered by the testimonial contract, its humanitarian ethics of recognition, and the codification of human rights.

‘Testimonies’, argues Young, are ‘from the people who are looking at you as you read’ (2003, 8). He is right to suggest there is something dynamic and interactive about testimonial discourse, which is generically rhetorical and dialogic: an appeal to an addressee, a text in search of a witness, a desire to invoke witnessing publics. We speak of *bearing* witness to indicate the weight of responsibility and affect that follows this transfer. Testimony enables accounts of social injustice and oppression, of violence and suffering:

The specific task of literary testimony is, in other words, to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capacity of perceiving history—what is happening to others—in *one’s own body*, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one’s own immediate physical involvement. (Felman and Laub 1992, 108)

Literary testimonies are performative, rhetorical acts that ‘summon and beseech us’ as readers. Shifting jurisdictions and global transits of testimonial narrative record changing, historical thresholds of subaltern agency and dispossession. The contemporary case studies in this book record the vicissitudes of cycles of testimony, and the tenuous rush of a testimonial ‘event’. Subaltern subjects are not voiceless and nor are they victims, however their visibility, legibility, and audibility are tactical, contingent, and constrained. Equiano manages the production and dissemination of his *Interesting Narrative* with great care, conscious of the vicissitudes of benevolence—as is the Australian indigenous man Bennelong, whose ‘Letter’ is now anthologized as a testimonial artifact and foundation text of Australian literature. Mary Prince is an articulate antagonist who uses her *History* tactically, always aware of what can be said to her addressee. In

contemporary testimonial literature this tradition of tactical engagements in testimonial transactions continues. For example, in *There Was This Goat*, the testimony of Mrs Notrose Nobomvu Konile, one of the Gugulethu mothers who testified at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, remains inaudible and resistant to 'speaking truth' in reconciliation discourse and, like Zoë Wicomb and Yazir Henry, she questions the privileges of enchanted witness. In Dave Eggers's biographical fiction *What Is the What* Valentino Achak Deng negotiates to produce a fictional form of his testimony that can engage with the exhaustion of the testimonial cycle generated by Lost Boys/Child Soldier narrative, where its witnessing public is now enervated by compassion 'fatigue'. Testimonial discourse involves cross-cultural transactions that create intimate attachments between those who testify and those who bear witness, and this is an opportunity for dissent and contestation that is used by these 'articulate antagonists' across the *longue durée* of testimonial literature.⁸

There is an enduring concern that testimonial transactions reproduce the dynamics of colonization and dispossession, contributing to what Rosemary Jolly calls 'cultured violence' (2010).⁹ For example Saidiya Hartman points out that benevolence and declarations of slave humanity often intensified the brutal exercise of power, and reproduced scenes of subjection (1997, 3). The recognition mediated through testimonial narrative is a fragile cross-cultural contract. The 'rights' that are attached to those who testify in human rights discourse, the emotional attachments created by benevolence and humanitarianism, and the humane recognition bestowed through empathic identification are privileges of the witness, susceptible to what Elizabeth Povinelli calls 'the cunning of recognition' (2002), and historically contingent. These can be withheld, or they can disconnect—through aversion, disgust, shame, and compassion 'fatigue'. Testimony can create a piercing and transformative 'bearing' witness that triggers advocacy, responsibility, and accountability, which move the reader and produce collective 'witnessing publics', but these are temporary and contingent collectives hailed through rhetorical address, an active engagement and responsibility that is subject to change (Torchin 2012, 14). Campaigns for abolitionism and emancipation produced opportunities for slave narrative to make an intervention in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and late last-century discourses of truth and reconciliation triggered

testimonial cultures in Africa, the Americas, and Australia. Reading across these testimonial cultures in this book reveals a postcolonial literary history and tradition embedded in the ebb and flow of testimonial cultures, their opportunism and agency, their limitations and decline, their new lines of engagement in the colonial present.

Colonial modernity is strangely familiar to us now, in what has been described as a new age of testimony when Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, Saartjie Baartman, and Bennelong have vivid afterlives in contemporary literature, and in culture more generally. In choosing testimonial transactions as a way of navigating the history and traditions of postcolonial life writing I am not introducing the field of postcolonial life narrative, or surveying its canonical texts in this book, for this has been done admirably elsewhere. What follows here draws on the theory, history, and heritage of postcolonial criticism to suggest ways of reading life writing in and through one of its most radical and conflicted forms: testimonial narrative, and its engagement with the ethical, political, and historical legacies of those ‘great world events’ fundamental to locations of culture: slavery, apartheid, dispossession, forced migration. The location of testimony on the boundary of the human and the non-human (the animal, the thing, the unborn, and the dead) and as a discursive threshold that regulates and manages the distinctions between them is a legacy of the Enlightenment and colonial modernity. Testimony takes us to worlds where the boundaries of the civilized and the strange are perpetually a work in progress, returning repeatedly to that ‘global heritage’ of postcolonialism: the struggle to imagine new humanisms and the possibilities for activism and social change that follow.

Notes

1. See the General Introduction by Graham Huggan (2013b) for a discussion of the controversy over Fanon and his legacy in postcolonial theory now.
2. For useful surveys of these traditions of autobiography criticism and the departures instigated by feminism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism, see Smith and Watson (1992, 2010), Stanley (1992), Nussbaum (1995), Marcus (1999), Anderson (2001), and Al-Hassam Golley (2003).
3. ‘Colonial modernity’ is a term that recognizes the development of multiple and alternative modernities produced by the global and transcultural

dissemination and mediation of European modernity. See Ashcroft (2009) for a discussion of postcolonialism and alternative modernities.

4. There are also several recent studies, for example Stef Craps's *Postcolonial Witnessing* (2013) on trauma narrative and the special issue of *Biography* on 'baleful postcoloniality', edited by Salah D. Hassan and David Álvarez (2013), that adopt a more specific approach to postcolonialism and life narrative.
5. *De/Colonizing the Subject* is the title of a germinal collection of essays edited by Smith and Watson (1992) that draws together a number of important interventions in the field with a specific focus on the politics of gender.
6. Moretti is inspired by the historian Fernand Braudel here to develop 'distant reading', a way of reading across many texts in search of affiliations and interconnections.
7. Farrier develops this argument more extensively in his co-authored article with Patricia Tuitt in the *Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (Farrier and Tuitt 2013).
8. 'Articulate antagonists' is used by Benita Parry to describe those who disrupt colonial epistemologies, and construct their own self inscriptions, drawing on non-western knowledges and traditions: 'Since the native woman is constructed within multiple social relationships and positioned as the product of different caste, class and cultural specificities, it should be possible to locate traces and testimony of women's voice on those sites where women inscribed themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artisans and artists, and by this to modify Spivak's model of the silent subaltern' (19–20).
9. In her discussion of 'directions and ends' in postcolonial studies Benita Parry presents a trenchant critique of 'revisionist' representations of colonialism as a process of transculturation in a contact zone. 'If the purpose is to construe colonialism as a complicated, overlapping and entangled event, then this should not imply that its operations are to be understood as necessarily conducted in an interstitial space' (2004, 8). Parry is concerned that discourse analysis and its representations of colonialism as transactional can rewrite an historical project of invasion, exploitation, and expropriation as a symbiotic encounter, which fails to attend to the ongoing violence of colonization (8–9).
10. For a more extensive discussion on the concept of recognition, see Oliver's *Witnessing* (2001) and Hesford's *Spectacular Rhetorics* (2011). Hesford in particular addresses spectatorship and how a human rights imaginary shapes processes of legal and cultural recognition that create witnessing publics through testimonial discourse.

Part 1

Colonial Testimonial,
1789–1852

Olaudah Equiano and Watkin Tench, London, 1789

In the spring of 1789 two very different life narratives were published in London. The first, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, is a slave narrative, and Equiano is the first Anglophone writer of African descent to assume the status of the autobiographical 'I'. The second is a memoir, a brief journal by Captain Watkin Tench: *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay*, and the first eyewitness account of the new penal settlement at Port Jackson, New South Wales. Tench's journal was rushed to press by Debrett's of London and three editions, a chapbook version, and translations into French, Dutch, and German appeared that same year. Tench, meanwhile, remained at Port Jackson and began to write the second instalment, *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, published in 1793. Equiano, on the other hand, published his book by subscription, convincing buyers to purchase copies prior to publication, and he worked hard to promote and sell each edition and expand the list of subscribers until his death in 1797. As the title page records, this was 'Printed for, and sold by the Author', and he met with immediate success: there were two editions in 1789, and more to follow.

By drawing these two life narratives together and comparing their textual histories in that London spring of 1789, we read across life narratives of slavery and penal settlement that circulated in close proximity in the metropolis and across Europe. Tench and Equiano are different subjects, and the historical, ideological, and cultural authorization of these two autobiographical 'I's draw on vastly

different experiences and knowledges. However they have one thing in common: their *value*. Each offered an autobiographical account that gave witness to the previously unseen, and in turn each called upon the reader to bear witness to unknown and scarcely imaginable scenes from the 'New World'. Equiano's testimony is a first-person account of suffering, including an account of the transatlantic voyage from Africa to slavery in the New World by an enslaved African survivor. Equiano was not the first Afro-British writer—he was preceded by Ignatius Sancho and his friend and collaborator Quobna Ottobah Cugoana—however, the market value of the *Narrative* and its usefulness for the abolitionist movement depended on its unique first-person account of the horrors of the Middle Passage. Tench too offered an original eyewitness account, of a penal colony that remained controversial in Britain. Both narratives brought remote subjects close to home, they appealed to readers to bear witness to experiences of slavery, colonization, and empire, and they provoked moral debates about race, indigeneity, and indentured labour in the management of remote colonial societies. Both draw on the epistemological prestige of the eyewitness and its authoritative experiential knowledge that was a product of New World encounters in colonial modernity.

Dynamics of testimony and witness that shape the beginnings of postcolonial life writing are strangely familiar now. We too live at a time when testimonial narrative is highly valued as a mode of bearing witness to the suffering of distant strangers, and when 'human rights and narrated lives' is a component of political activism and consciousness raising.¹ There is an affinity between the production and reception of life narrative in colonial modernity and in the 'age of testimony' now: the language of human rights, codified as an international discourse in the twentieth century, drew on a long tradition of moral philosophy about the human, and ethical responsibility for others.² During the eighteenth century, in association with the European Enlightenment and the rapid expansion of empire, there was a change in sensibilities towards an awareness of the suffering of other living things—both human and animal. This 'Humanitarian Revolution' was associated with campaigns to ameliorate the suffering of those without social power: women, servants, children, slaves, indigenous peoples, peasants, prisoners, animals. Its concerns seem distinctively contemporary now: an ethical turn to recognition of

distant strangers, debates about empathic engagement with others and compassionate concern for their suffering, a turn to testimonial narrative and bearing witness for those who testify on behalf of others, an appeal to what we now call 'rights discourse'. Concerns about spectatorship, benevolence and pity, the ethics of spectatorship, and the making of the human in and through empathic witness are central to an emerging ethics in the production and reception of life narrative in colonial modernity. As Anna Laura Stoler remarks, the distribution of compassion, sympathy, and pity—who had them and to whom they were rightly directed—was pivotal to the working of imperial formations and the exacting exclusions and inequities structured through the architecture of empire (2013, 54). Literature played a major role in the development of sensibility in this humanitarian revolution: there was a rapid rise in literacy during this period, and the role of the novel and poetry in the 'invention of the human' is demonstrable (Slaughter 2007, Hunt 2007, Scarry 2012).

In the late eighteenth century, as now, there was a surge of autobiographical narrative that appealed to the beneficent virtues and an ethics of empathic witness. Life writing of all kinds from colonial spaces—memoirs by writers like Tench, eyewitness observers of colonial cultures, and those who gave testimony to slavery and dispossession, such as Equiano—created scenes of witness that actively elicited recognition of unknown and unseen others, shaping lines of sight that framed colonial spaces and peoples as bodies of evidence. But the 'imperial eye' is uncertain, and spectatorship is an ethical and philosophical practice that is subject to debate. In 1789 Tench and Equiano not only brought so-called new worlds into view, their texts also demanded a difficult and emotional engagement with them; in effect they draw the modern reader as secondary witness into being. They suggest how tenuous and ephemeral this connection with distant strangers mediated through testimonial narrative can be. When Tench's *Complete Account* was published just a few years later, the taste for accounts of the penal colony in the Pacific had diminished. Similarly Equiano's narrative remained hostage to the fortunes of the abolitionist movement and public opinion in Britain in the decade that followed.

Both the *Interesting Narrative* and *Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* invite approaches to life narrative that examine textual cultures in an empirical and material way. Reading these narratives